

Born Of Nightmares

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BORN OF NIGHTMARES

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F O R E W O R D

Thank you for accompanying us here, this anthology contains stories that will tap into your emotions and fears like no other. It has been hard work making this happen but I believe it has paid off for all of us. Now all that remains is for these stories to be read and appreciated by you the reader. I am sure you will enjoy what you read as I did whilst I was putting this together.

The short stories contained passed this point are in my opinion having read them more than once are fantastic. Again it has been such a pleasure working with talented writers and I hope to work with them again in the near future, if they will have me that is.

Special thanks to everyone who made this possible and thank you to my family and friends for their unwavering support.

We welcome you.

Peter J. Hodgson

Stress Issue

A Story by Colin Perkins

Tap, tap, tap...

Tap, tap, tap...

Knock, Knock, KNOCK...

“Would you open the blasted door already?” Michael called out harshly as he now pounded on the weak, wooden door.

He would have gotten around to putting his fist through it if Jason hadn't at last jarred the thing open from the other side. Once the door swung open Jason put his head out to gaze with that warn little face of his. He looked up at Michael with his eyes slightly opened and did a very slow blink.

“Yes?” Jason asked in a whisper of a beat.

“You want to join the party?” Michael inquired.

“No.”

The door then shut.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK...

The door blasted open from Jason pulling it back in an effort to stop

Michael's constant war against it.

"What?" Jason tiredly shot.

"You've been stuck in your room three days now working on that project. I know it's a big one, but if you stay in there any longer you're going to snap. You've got to come out for at least ten minutes and join the party. Just forget about the work load right now, have some fun, and kick back. Like, you over work yourself. You get yourself all stressed out and you just can't live that way." Michael coxed.

"This isn't just a big project, it's the last one."

"All the more reason to celebrate, like; look at yourself, you're falling over here."

"I'll take a brake. I just got to write off twelve more pages and then I'll watch a movie or something. I don't like parties."

"All you got in your dvd set is twilight zone reruns. You have seen all of them fifty times each. You need this, just come out, have a drink, and then get back to work."

"I'll come out after page twelve."

"Ash is here, she says she wants to talk to you."

"Really?"

"Yep, you don't want to let a cute little one like that down do you?"

Jason paused, and once again did a shockingly long blink. He sighed heavily and made what would turn out to be a very regrettable decision.

"Five minutes, I'll join the party for five minutes," Jason rasped.

Jason was in his last stretch of his college career. He had gotten to it with sweat, hard work, frustration, and endless nights. He kept to himself and snapped pencils by the dozen fold, which is why it was all so shocking that any girl at all would be interested in him. Ash, however, did have an

interest in him. They weren't really dating; they just seemed to hang out from time to time, mostly they bumped into each other off and on, but for all purposes they were a couple.

Michael, the crafty little prick, even though he was rather tall, that he knew he could get Jason out of his little cage by using her as bait. Michael was tall, big, with a blond army cut. His shirts were always meant to show off that he could break you in two if he wanted. He was a jock, but a smart one. Somehow, after all the fights he had been in, he hadn't managed to get any brain damage and was a sharp, well polished, butcher blade.

Jason was small, scrawny, and timid. He had cut up eyeglasses and messy, black hair. He never combed it, hardly ever kept his nails trimmed, and always wore a shirt that he had on at least twice before in that week. He was a mess, an over worked, stressed out mess.

Michael and Jason were both roommates at one of the college's dorms. The live in place they had did its purpose, and was just big enough for a get together. Jason pulled himself out of his dark lit room and entered into the main area, entered into the party. People were drinking, joking, kicking back, and instantly Jason felt the need to get back to his little computer and type up the last bits of his assignment.

"Hey!" Ash called out, sticking out her hand and arm over the crowd.

Ash always stood out like a thumb, what with her completely shaved head and her love for leather. She pushed and kicked her way by the masses until she got to Jason and Michael and did her trade mark curtsy, which she always started a chat with.

"I'll get you your drink Jason, while you two have your chat," Michael stated as if in a hurry.

Michael was then, almost instantly, gone; leaving Jason looking into Ash's big blue eyes, which looked concerned, very concerned.

While Ash tried to pull Jason into a part of the party that was a little more calmed down, namely the kitchen, with its sets of many knives, Michael tracked down long time friend, and sort of business associate, Charles.

Jason found him gazing at a ladies lower body that was at the other side of the place and was mingling with a regular party hopper and good looking gentleman. Charles on the other hand, was not a good looking gentleman.

“Charles, hey Charles,” Michael stated.

Charles dragged his eyes away from the woman and slurred out his response, “Ya.”

“In my room,” Michael lightly ordered and with that Charles pulled himself from where he was standing and wandered into the bedroom beside them, with Michael closing the door behind them.

“You got it?” Michael asked after he locked the door.

“What?” Charles tongue fumbled over itself as he made sure he didn’t fall over.

“You know what.”

Charles put his hand in his jean pocket and then pulled out a very small, very black, pill.

“So, how good of a hallucinogen is it?” Michael asked.

“It’s a deliriant to be exact.”

“A what?”

“Don’t make me talk smart,” Charles spoke as he caught himself again from falling over.

Charles then went on with, “Okay, you’ve got psychedelics and then you got deliriant, they are both hall, hall, hallucinogens, but they are very different. Ya with me?”

Michael nodded.

“Okay, psychedelics are like LSD, they alter the way you see things a bit, but just a bit. Then you have deliriant. Okay, with deliriant it’s a full

blown brain explosion. You see things, and you think they are real,” Charles struggled to explain.

“So, it causes hallucinations.”

“Ya, it’s just most drugs simply tap your head and heighten what you see, while a deliriant, well, it will bash your face in.”

“Perfect,” Michael took the pill out of Charles hand and pocketed it, while fishing out a set of fives and placing it in Charles’ other palm.

“I would think twice before taking it. I took one last week, had a very insightful discussion with my mom, she’s dead.”

“I’m not taking it; I’m giving it to a friend. He’s a bit stressed out right now, and he could use it, besides, it will spice up the party to see him running around, chasing rabbits,” Michael responded.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, full of knives in large wooden knife holders, Jason and Ash were somehow managing to have a small discussion between each other. They talked quietly, especially Ash.

“You know that night we had a little while ago?” Ash said with a concerned tone.

Jason nodded.

“Well, considering that night, do you think we make a good couple? Like, should we keep this up, should we go out more, you know?” Ash questioned.

“I think we can just keep things as they are,” Jason responded.

“I’m not sure us hanging out every now and then would work anymore.”

“Why not?”

“I think we should go out more, you know.”

“Ash, what’s wrong?”

“It’s complicated, and someone might hear,”

“Ash, what is wrong?”

“I’m pre...” Ash started but was cut off by a cup hitting the counter.

“Here’s your drink,” Michael said, seemingly he had come out of nowhere to bring Jason his beverage.

The cup was a small, little glaze mug which had some very yellow liquid in it and a dissolved black little pill. Jason grabbed the glass and then nodded at Michael.

“Now you have some well deserved fun and relax,” Michael said as he backed away into the crowd of people at the get together.

Jason held the glaze up in almost a toast like fashion and then he drank the liquid down. He put the cup on the counter and then turned back to Ash.

Ash leaned up beside Jason and then whispered into his ear, “I’m pregnant.”

“You’re,” Jason took a gulp and then repeated, “You’re.”

“Ya.”

“I’ll be in the bathroom for just one moment, okay,” Jason quickly spurted out and then rushed off.

Ash looked down at the floor and sighed.

He made it to the bathroom as fast as he could and slammed the door closed behind him. The room was small, tight, cramped, and hard to breathe in. Jason put his hands on the sink and looked into the mirror.

“Okay, just relax, stay calm. Stay in here for a moment, put some water on your face, and cool yourself down. She’s pregnant?” Jason said to himself.

He then put some much needed water on his face and tried to compose himself. After that he turned around and left the room. Once he was out he proceeded to try and get by the masses of people and back to Ash. He shoved one person out of the, and then another, and broke his way through the walls of guests. One person almost fell over as a result.

“Hey, watch where you’re going you jerk off!” she spat out harshly.

Jason quickly turned around and looked at her. She stuck out a long fork like tongue at him and stared at him angrily with red eyes. No the pupils weren’t red, the entire eyes were, just massive pools of red blood, that leaked out and ran down her cheeks.

It’s not real.

Jason closed his eyes and opened them to find that the girl was normal. He shook off the snake like tongue, the bleeding eyes, and went on his way. He got back to Ash and just hugged her. He needed the hug, needed to calm down.

“So, what do you think?” Ash asked.

Jason pulled himself off of her and then breathed to himself. He could face this, he could handle life, and he was going to stay calm.

“HEY JASON HOW’S IT GOING!” a voice thundered out and then a hand slammed into Jason’s shoulder.

Jason turned around to see Michael with a big smile on his face.

“HOW ARE YOU ENJOYING YOURSELF?!” Michael said with words that sounded like massive blasts of lightning.

Michael’s smile grew.

“I’m fine,” Jason responded as quickly as he could.
Something’s wrong here.

Michael’s smile grew some more, stretched out, and expanded.

“YOU SURE YOU’RE ALRIGHT?! YOU LOOK STRANGE!”
Michael blasted.

His smile got bigger, his lips pulled back, vanished, and his teeth got sharp, very sharp, like knives. Jason eyed the knives in one of the wooden holders as Michael’s smile continued to expand. It just got larger, and larger, and larger, until there wasn’t a face anymore, there wasn’t a head at all. All that stood there on top of the neck was a massive set of blade like teeth. They opened wide and laughed in a deafening sound. Jason had to put his hands to his ears and collapsed to the ground.

Something’s not right with me, something’s in my head.

Jason stayed on the ground, hands glued to his ears.

“Jason, are you alright?” Ash asked, concerned.

Jason looked up at her, smiled.

Everything’s going to be alright.

Then blood splattered over Jason’s face, got into his mouth, got into his eyes, and blinded him. He quickly cleaned out his eyes with his hand, letting in Michael’s deafening laugh for just a moment. He rapidly then got his hands back to his ears and then saw what caused the blood. Two little, red, hands stuck out of Ash’s lower stomach. They had exploded forth from her body and dripped with the carnage it had caused. The two hands then grabbed the hunk of stomach in the middle between them and started to pry it apart. It ripped open and an ungodly amount of blood sprayed forward, practically bathing Jason in a shower of it. The baby then pulled itself out of the gapping wound. It smiled at Jason, with a big, nasty, blade filled mouth and red dotted eyes.

“Isn’t he cute?!” Ash chirped.

Something’s wrong in my head! This isn’t real! This is in my head!

Jason pulled himself up, grabbed a knife from the holder.

Now calm down!

Michael, grin as big as ever, teeth gleaming and ready to cut flesh, put his hands forward and said, "JASON, PUT THE KNIFE DOWN. I PUT SOMETHING IN YOUR DRINK, AND YOU'RE JUST HAVING A BAD TRIP OKAY, THAT'S ALL IT IS, A BAD TRIP!"

Michael's teeth grinned at Jason, mocked him, and enraged him. Michael was a monster; they were all monsters, everyone at the party.

He drugged me! He put something in my drink! HE DRUGGED ME!

Jason took the knife in hand and then plunged it into Michael.

DIE MOTHER FUCKER!

"Okay, now breath," Michael said, now with his normal human face back on.

Jason took in a big breath.

"You all better now?" Michael asked.

"Ya, everything just kind of hit me at once you know," Jason explained and then went on with, "the school work, Ash, and then you and your god awful prank."

"I know, I know, a bit much to handle, but you overreacted. Like, you have got to get that stress issue of yours under control," Michael said.

"I didn't overreact that bad."

"Jason, you killed everyone at the party. Now, granted, after you ate out my heart, that one girl did call you a psycho path, but did you really need to jam a fork in her eye?"

"Hey, that was just uncalled for and rude. Like, most of the party guests I simply snapped their necks. Like, that's not a very bad way to go."

"Jason,"

“What?”

“Jason, I want you to promise me that you are going to relax and work on your stress issue.”

“I promise.”

“Mean it.”

“I promise okay, next time I get upset I’ll kill five people, max, then I’ll calm myself down and take a breather.”

“That’s good to hear, now, no hard feelings about the drug in your drink?”

“It’s water under the bridge,” Jason said and then patted Michael on the back, causing Michael’s head to come off of his cold, dead body.

“Oh, let me get that for you,” Jason said and reached down to pick up the head from the carcass littered ground.

Knives lay resting in countless heaps of corpses covering the floor. Necks were snapped, limbs removed, Ash had been strangled to death. The floor was full of them, the bodies, the victims from Jason’s latest out burst. At least it was a lot less than last time.

When the drug wears off, please don’t freak out.

The End

BROTHERS IN BLOOD

A short story by Peter J. Hodgson

PART ONE: PREY

I don't possess a diary or a journal but I need to record my thoughts and feelings in this way. See, I think that my mind is slipping away from me even as I sit here typing these words. Funny...how I can still find the momentum to type. I suffer from episodic flashes, in other words I see weird stuff that appears very real to me. Occasionally these visions turn to auditory so I am able to hear as well as see what others do not. There is an urgency to tell you this, as I don't fully believe that my "episodes" are entirely mentally related but of something with a purpose. Sure he bashes his head this crazy man trying to see credibility within his decline.

Moved again, instead of the damp infested apartment of 119 Oak Hill this apartment seems nicer, peaceful. Oddly I don't feel eyes watching me all the time, must be the old family secret setting in. All that god damn schizophrenia from two generations back. Harold Banks my neighbour across the hall was all too happy to inform that the previous tenant had gone stark raving mad. The previous tenant shot his cat in the face and wrote strange words all over the walls in repetition. I actually found that living in someone else's madness would be something of a comfort. Three weeks passed and nothing strange happened, not one vision. Though for the past few days I have been noticing little things like stuff that have been moved. My alien bobblehead moved from one side of the TV to the other. Coffee mug shifted from the sink to the bathroom, what the fuck I thought. These little things could have been happening for days or maybe weeks before I even noticed.

St. Marks Psychiatric Clinic

A typical layout for the interior of a Psychiatrists office. Leather couch, dim lights and framed artwork designed specifically to promote comfort and positive feeling. A child running through reeds with a bright kite. Butterflies in flight in their masses and paintings of open country so warm and peaceful. Doctor Erika Mills is sitting opposite her patient Chaz Gordon. Chaz has mildly bloodshot eyes and is twiddling his thumbs whilst poorly connecting eye to eye with Doctor Erika.

"I don't mean to rush you Chaz but you haven't said anything for over thirty minutes. I can tell you want to say something, something is bothering you and I doubt its my perfume."

"Sorry, you smell really nice...it's a welcome distraction. I just don't want to be alone right now I will take what I can get," says Chaz.

Doctor Erika pours Chaz a fresh glass of cold water, he takes it and smiles a fake smile. Chaz takes a sip of the water then places the glass on the desk.

"You are more distant than our last session, less inclined to share. We discussed how unhealthy that was didn't we. You cannot keep this hidden Chaz you have to let this out before..."

"Before what?"

Doctor Erika shows him a picture of patients in the asylum their appearance are withdrawn, blank expressions and dark circles under their eyes. Troubled people of everyday society that look like they haven't spoken in months, maybe years. Chaz raises his eyebrows then looks back at Doctor Erika.

"You think I belong in an asylum Doctor? That in itself is nuts," he says pointedly.

"No. You have to ask yourself what the road to insanity is, the symptoms. These poor people were on that path alone and afraid, it maybe the fear of dealing with their problems that drove them to that. Draining them of hope and the need to continue. Why do you think god invented Psychiatric help?

I get paid big cake to make sure you don't go down that road, I want you stay here but without your problems."

Chaz vision blurs slightly he rubs his eyes with his thumbs. Something shifts from his peripheral vision, he jolts and looks to his left.

"What is it?"

"Didn't you see it? It was right there to my left looking at me, it was looking right at me," Chaz is spooked by what he has seen.

Did I mention that I see things? Many have seen them too, but like anything else is dismissed as a light flare, blind spot or stray eyelash maybe even a speck of dust. I didn't read so much into them until I caught the invading vision, he failed to vanish quite so quickly. People with pale faces and the darkest eyes following those they want and observing. For what purpose? I hope I never get to find out. One thing is clear to me at this point, they know I see them too. Of all the saints and heretics, witches and visionaries that have come before, I could never claim such fame. Just another crazy for the fires of popular doubt, the world will see me as nothing else.

Chaz gets up from the couch and walks toward the blinds the bright light is pouring in. Erika takes a note of this in her patient log book. Chaz lights up a cig then slides the window open, takes one large drag then blows it out of the window. The spiralling chaotic smoke snakes away into the light breeze outside then gradually vanishes leaving no visible trace behind.

"Did you ever feel like someone is writing your every move?" Erika closes the log book then stands and walks over to the window.

"The notes I make are for your benefit Chaz not mine, if it bothers I can stop making the notes," says Erika.

“No, that’s not what I meant Erika. Sometimes I feel like my life has been predestined to end horribly and their laughing and mocking my every feeble attempt at understanding.”

Erika places her hand gently on his shoulder. Chaz wasn’t used to this kind of contact, his sex life was dry. The woman he met thought he was a little too weird and paranoid, always looking and second guessing shadows. Chaz closes his eyes and breathes this in, this kind of comfort soothed him.

“A character in a story has no purpose except that which the writer intends. The paths are there for others but all my paths seem to have led to the same place, leading to what I fear,” says Chaz opening his eyes.

“What do you fear?”

The buzzer on the timer goes rampant, session over. Chaz flicks the cig out of the window then turns to get his coat. His hand meets Erika’s for a tender silent moment. Their eyes meet each other, his blue eyes to her jade colored eyes.

“Same time next week, maybe we can make more progress,” says Erika as she smiles at him a new kind of smile. Like she sees him as something more.

“Are you free this Friday?”

Erika blushes, her eyes widen their hands are still bonded. Chaz smiles the same smile he used when Shelley Marie Joni asked him to the prom in 2003.

“You could meet me here at 8 o’clock?” says Erika.

Hours passed maybe some days too I cannot really differentiate them anymore. Between all the stress relieving and anxiety drugs mixed with sleep aids its all a blur nowadays. Fact is I wasn’t lying when I told Erika that I felt like some creation in a fucking book. Maybe god or the author was throwing me a bone here, figuratively speaking.

Some hope of companionship or even a charitable lay, either way was great. I seem to fascinate Erika in ways her other patients don't, since last month she has rescheduled appointments to accommodate me. Maybe I should feel special, at least she finds me interesting.

Chaz wakes up smiling, its Friday the big day. He gets out of bed, still in clothes from the previous day. The radio comes on as he is walking towards the bathroom.

Welcome to the morning news with me Matt Stewart, this is the news as it happens brought to you by MSWN America.

(scratching static) There are so many bodies, so much blood (screams in the background mixed with static) so many dead...

Chaz pops his head from the bathroom to look at the radio with some confusion. The radio station sounded very vintage he'd never heard anything quite like it so he kneels next to the radio.

...The bomb has fallen...(static)...survivors have seen strange looking unarmed figures in dark clothing wondering around the bomb site...(static)...MY BABIES...WHERE ARE MY BABIES...(screaming static)...

He is very unsettled by this and tries to turn off the radio but the radio isn't plugged in!

...THIS IS THE END!...RUN FOR YOUR SOULS...(static fades out)

The radio shorts out. Chaz takes a breathe or two, auditory hallucinations always took something away.

"I don't know how much more of this I can take."

Chaz picks up the radio and stands up. He stares into its face dial, looking for something though not quite sure what it is. Some flicker of random energy, something to explain why it turned on when unplugged.

"Dumb ass, check for batteries."

Chaz turns the radio over and slides off the battery

compartment. The compartment is very vacant, Chaz throws the radio across the room out of anger.

“Breathe Chaz, get a hold of yourself mate...you got a hot date tonight, come on dude its in the hole you just got to keep it there.” Chaz utters quietly to himself.

The sorry looking radio sits in pieces near the nightstand Chaz collects himself and changes his shirt and pants. Then he starts running his fingers through his hair styling it and bringing the longer hair forward. To complete the transformation from a guy that just slept in his clothes to a guy dressed in new clothes, he concludes with throwing water over his face.

“There are no voices. There are no visions. This is all in my head and you still have a hot date tonight,” says Chaz looking at his own reflection.

Chaz grabs his jacket then walks toward the front door, he opens it and leaves his apartment. When Chaz has left his apartment the radio is no longer broken near the nightstand, instead it is back where it was and in one piece.

Chaz leaves his apartment building to the street, it is mid day and the streets should be full of people. There is nothing except a surreal lack of colour except for Chaz’s red tee and blue jeans. Suddenly a siren rings out Chaz steps back up to the wall and notices an abundance of newspaper pages on the ground. The text is entirely German, the date is 1937. Chaz sees something out of his peripheral vision, a dark figure is leaning up against the wall pointing at a large building. The building has windows with hundreds of faces staring out at him crying and pleading for their lives.

“No, it cant be! The Holocaust, death camps!” says Chaz whilst walking cautiously toward the building.

The mysterious stranger dressed in black is also wearing a fedora which is covering his eyes though the dark circles are clear.

“Who are you people? Why do you follow me?” says Chaz. The stranger smiles, his teeth are rotten and yellowed with blackness. The smile seems to stretch way up to his cheek bones like his mouth had been cut from each side. The strangers demonic presence and uneasy silence gets under Chaz’s skin. He ignores the strangers lack of motion and runs toward the building to try open the door.

“This is insanity.” he says whilst trying to open the door.

“Your wasting your time boy, these people died years ago...now they’re but echoes of pain.” says the stranger.

Chaz turns to look at the stranger then looks back at the building seeing only the dry remains of its unwilling captors. Chaz shakes his head then walks back to his apartment building entrance past the stranger.

“Such a burden that must be, seeing what has already gone. Seeing the tragedies of time and how they like to torment.” the stranger sneers.

“Are you a vision or a nightmare?” says Chaz.

“We are the watchers my boy and you are something a whole lot more, but don’t let that go to your head.” says the stranger followed by a grin.

Nazi soldiers with rifles are chasing a young boy down the street. The boy is dressed in a ragged school blazer stained with the blood of his family. Chaz hopelessly watches as the Nazi’s chase and shoot down the boy as he reaches the dusty hills. Chaz shields his eyes from seeing the boy roll back down the hill with a gunshot in his head. The Nazi soldiers laugh like this is some kind of sport.

“That one gave us quite a run, another worthless Jew for the fires. Pack him up.” says one soldier to the other in German.

“You watch? Why? For a long time I have been waiting for someone to turn up and tell me I am NOT crazy. So tell me why this is happening to me?” says Chaz his eyes filled with tears.

The stranger doesn’t seem to care his expression fixed and

fascinated by Chaz. Like a wolf to its prey. The stranger takes off his hat and to Chaz's horror sees that the stranger is missing one or two vital things. There is nothing where his eyes should be, nothing but skin almost as if he was never meant to have any.

"As you can see mister Chaz! Our vision isn't limited by mere aesthetics yet we see what you see."

Chaz closes his eyes as the stranger walks toward him, the very sight of this is sickening to his stomach. The surroundings begin to move, the ground turns to blood and flesh and the skies begin to rain blood. The stranger reaches out to touch Chaz's face.

"Give us your mind Chaz we are hungry, we are always hungry and a gift like yours will feed us all!"

More of his kind crawls from the shadows and blood rain puddles, they move towards Chaz in their thousands. This no mans land has life its walls are breathing and pulsing outward.

"NO, GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME YOU FUCKING MOTHERLESS FREAKS!" Chaz cries out whilst digging into the flesh walls where his door was to find a handle.

Chaz is surrounded by these beings hungry for his mind. A kind of vampire, certainly an abomination of some kind. Suddenly Chaz find himself screaming out in normal everyday public outside his apartment building. Everyone is looking on in fear at Chaz's apparent insane break. Chaz opens his eyes to see that he is okay, there are no monsters just him and the town. Chaz doubles over then eventually falls on his ass with his head in his hands weeping and afraid. A woman comes to his aid where everyone else just stands there watching.

Carnbrook Psychiatric Hospital

Six months later

Truth be told I think my mind has become prey to something, monsters! I have seen them, them being the word here. My feeling of being a character in a sick play had evolved to someone's lunch which made the whole thing, less easy on the mind. So I find myself here, completely broke down and vulnerable and sitting in a nice cell. Last night though, something took a bite out of my mind, literally!

Chaz is tossing and turning in the darkness of his own cell. The soft walls gently kissed by the light from the small window in the thick steel door. Sleep hasn't been kind to him, not to mention the drugs to calm his state. Bed check didn't make the sleep easier neither, orderlies shining their little penlights in the patients eyes. He rubs his eyes, the redness and dryness from too many sleepless hours is catching up with him. The past months have been a wash of violent outbursts, nightmarish hallucinations and bed wetting. Erika visits him in a psychiatric capacity when he is lucid enough to speak a full sentence. Suddenly there is a loud violent pounding at his cell door, not like he could answer it.

"Your never fucking getting me you brain sucking freak bastards!" says Chaz in a tired state unable to raise his voice.

The pounding gets louder and louder and the room starts to change. The walls expand outward until they vanish, his bed sprout thousands of blades of grass. Chaz has his eyes shut and hugging the pillow in fear, he can hear the changes surrounding him.

"Not real, not real, not real this is not real. Come on Chaz take back your mind man, show them you have big nards."

Chaz slowly opens his eyes to find that he is laying in a vast poppy field. The sun is shining and the sky is blue, not a cloud in sight. Chaz steadily uncurls from his position in patient pyjamas.

06:25 AM

Erika is marching down the hallway to the head desk she has a stern look on her face and a file in her hand. The orderly at the head desk takes a sip of black coffee and looks up at Erika.

"I have filed for Chaz Stocks release into my care here are the forms signed and witnessed."

Erika passes the orderly the forms which he then looks at before getting up and escorting Erika down to the wards. The orderly unlocks the door and opens it with Erika standing behind him. They both look on in mystery when they find Chaz's cell to be empty!

"He's gone, there is no way he could have got out." says the orderly.

"Well he got out somehow people don't just vanish from locked cells." says Erika annoyed at the situation.

Erika stares at the empty room, the empty bed with the ruffled sheets. A copy of the bible open and on the floor with pages folded over and scribbled words repeated over. Erika approaches and kneels to pick up the bible curiously overseeing the words written.

"What does it say doctor?" questions the orderly.

"Save me!" answers Erika with one eyebrow raised.

Somewhere here in this world of poppy fields Chaz is wondering. The poppy's begin to drip and ooze blood, victims of horrible murders and executions from war and brutality are growing out of the ground. Each one is reaching for him, their faces full of fixed terror. Some have bullet wounds in the head as well as elsewhere while many are

horribly burned. Some have limbs missing most likely past war injuries.

"I don't know why you come to me, please tell me, TELL ME!"

One of the walking dead comes closer his head is half rotten, ashes of what used to be skin and bone blowing off his half head. Its hand reaches out to Chaz, the look in his one eye is that of longing, for peace. Chaz walks backward, his heel grazes the edge of a canyon much to his shock he stops.

"The coming night is upon us Chaz, you and your brother are the only ones who can stop it. Your gifts will serve you, will serve all of living kind!" says the walking corpse soldier.

"Beware the ones that feed on gifts and curses they won't let you get far. Deceivers and betrayers, trust no one." says a small boy, his skin is full of lesions he was possibly a victim of a biological weapon.

Meanwhile...

Erika and the orderly are in the security room watching the playback monitors for a reason of how he got out. The camera outside his room shows his door then a sudden static surge now Chaz is in the corridor, his door is shut. The corridor camera shows Chaz walking towards the roof access door. Erika gets up in a panic and exits the room to head in the direction Chaz went, to the roof. The orderly struggles to keep up then Erika signals him to stay where he is and not to follow. She exits the building to the roof to find

Chaz close to edge of the building.

“CHAZ!” shouts Erika.

Chaz is slow to respond, the world he is in begins to melt away and to his astonishment he finds himself on the roof. He turns to Erika his face all confused and lost. She walks steadily over to him her hands are where he can see them, she doesn't want to force him closer to the edge.

“Don't step back baby, come towards me. Do you know where you are?”

“How the hell did I get up here, I was somewhere else, there were dead people and a field. They told me about my gift and what it means.” says Chaz shaking from the cold.

Erika puts both arms around him and walks him toward the entrance to the building. They walk past a maintenance locker close to the entrance, he picks up the screwdriver.

“We need to get you to bed, tomorrow you can tell me how you got out of your room.”

Chaz stops in his tracks and pulls away from her, he looks at her face and sees only Erika staring back at him. Chaz backs toward the edge, Erika grabs him.

“What are you?” says Chaz.

Erika changes, her face sinks inward and her eyes seal over. She smiles showing her mouthful of pointed teeth. Chaz clutches the screwdriver and stabs it in the throat without second guessing. The creature holds its throat as blood gushes from the wound all over Chaz.

“You'll never get me DO YOU HEAR ME YOU FREAKS?”

Chaz's voice shakes maddeningly, he kneels next to it and continues to stab what was Erika until it stops moving and twitching. The orderly is standing close to the door looking on in pure horror as Chaz gets up to face him. Chaz approaches the frightened orderly with the screwdriver tightly gripped and dripping.

“Are you one of them?” says Chaz his eyes wide and crazy.

“Who? Please don't hurt me.” says the scared orderly frozen

in one spot.

He looks over to Erika lying lifelessly and cold in her own blood and looks back at Chaz. Chaz looks at Erika and sees that she is human, her face has a fixed expression of terror and heartbreak. Chaz walks over to her and stares with a hateful lowbrow, after a moment his expression changes to panic and upset.

"Oh god what have I done? Erika? No it cant be you."

He walks toward the edge and throws the blood drenched screwdriver far away and out of sight. The orderly isn't qualified to deal with such situations so he remains frozen to the spot.

"Forgive me." says Chaz as he takes one last look at her.

He steps up on the wall and looks down, ten floors down. Chaz remembers her smile to their moment in the office before things went from bad to worse. Tears stream down his face as he looks up at the full moon staring down at him.

"Save me." he says silently.

Chaz leans forward with his whole body plummeting down to where there is slim chance of survival. Falling seems to take forever, the wind rushes up through his body and he remembers the warnings of the dead people. Every vision he has ever had of reality shifting and taking him places, places of pain. He closes his eyes and then suddenly a thud, bones break and there is nothing but darkness. The orderly rushes to the edge to see Chaz on the road with blood slowly pouring out of his wounds. His expression changes as he looks on, the panic turns to satisfaction.

"It is done your majesty!" says the orderly.

Erika comes into view and covered in blood with an equally satisfied expression. She wipes the blood from her throat wound, it seals up.

"I thought this one would be stronger, apparently death changes everything even the desire to live. I hoped he would at least have given us a chase to work up the appetite."

Erika looks at the corpse on the road laying in a pool of blood. "Have we located the other one?" Erika continues. Erika takes a lengthy drag and blows it out into the fresh night air and she smiles. The smoke configures to make a photo perfect image of a face, a young mans face. They both smile, the orderly licks his lips with hungry anticipation. "Perhaps this one will provide a more satisfying form of sustenance then we will be saved my dear acolyte. We have only to find him, the brother of this one has a more shall we say, impressive and tasty gift!" says Erika. "But the foretold uprising your grace? When it happens our enemies will return, do we have the time?" says the orderly. Erika places her hand on his shoulder to comfort him, she smiles then the rest of her kind appears covering the entire roof. Eyeless hungry beings from between the worlds gather to their goddess in their hundreds. "I wouldn't worry about timing my child, there are no more places to hide, nowhere left to run. The end is coming."

PART TWO: THE COMING NIGHT

A young man is standing in a poppy field, the green and red expanse stretches on for miles. Dreamlike and lonely the young man wanders here, in search of something he lost. He is wearing patient pyjamas and his name is sown into it: Chaz. Suddenly he stops to find a pen in his hand then every poppy in the field shrivels and dies. The pen is bleeding ink all over, then he hears a flapping sound, there are pages.

Dreamlike and lonely the young man sees an open journal on the ground in front of him, the pages loose and blowing. Chaz lowers himself to pick up the journal; it has his name on the leather bound cover. From within the bindings where the pages would normally be are a series of disaster and war time photos.

New York City, Christmas 1998

A young man is walking out of his office building hair slicked back and a big smile as a young woman is waiting. They kiss and start to walk hand in hand. Loud gunshots start to sound out, he grabs his girlfriend and shields her. The shots finish she is looking at him like he has gone mad, as is every bystander. To everyone else, there was no gunfire just a crazy young man shielding his girlfriend for no reason. His name is Larry Stocks and you might say “curses” run in the family. Larry’s brother Chaz claimed that he saw past tragedies in his waking life, he became haunted. For a time things were normal, Larry had repressed his ability and denied it as part of his attempt at a normal life. Sleeping was the worst, in dreams he couldn’t deny it or suppress what was slowly developing inside of him. His girlfriend Polly was the only thing in his life that made sense, sleeping was easier until she left him.

Cavendish Riggs, Rhode Island

Larry enters the local produce store owned by Janet and Joe Scotsman, a retired elderly couple. Working in their own

business for god know how many years pulling in less than 200 dollars a week and still nothing can wipe the smiles from their faces. Larry picks up a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter from the shelf then walks over to the counter to pay. Peanut butter was all he ever ate, Janet would always give him that concerned motherly look. The kind of expression that would suggest concern for a possible eating deficiency. Today she didn't give him the expression he was expecting.

"How are you today Janet?" Larry asks sheepishly.

Janet has no expression, her once sweet wrinkled face is dry and lifeless. The face of someone who has never smiled, never laughed or had any kind of happiness. Her eyes are wide and the dark pupils are like pinholes. Larry opens his wallet and passes her some money for the goods which she takes slowly.

"Is everything okay?" says Larry.

Larry jolts backward in fear he sees something wrong, very badly wrong with Janet's face. She doesn't have any eyes, skin is covering where eyes would normally be. There is no ocular cavities or wounds to suggest self mutilation or otherwise, nothing. Then for some reason unbeknownst to Larry's experience or anyone's her face is normal again.

"Thanks, have a nice day give my best to your husband." he strains to smile at her given his shocking vision then leaves the store briskly.

My brother saw such things once, he recorded everything in his journal. He called them Watchers, they stalk those with certain abilities. Maybe what I saw back there was somehow influenced by reading his journal. Or maybe not. Throughout history people have seen such things and perhaps the "men in black" phenomenon can be traced back to them. Men dressed in dark clothing and hiding in the dark. These beings that watch and thrive on such gifts somehow. I entertain such fascinating subject matter but I, unlike Chaz, cannot let the

nonsense cloud over sense. Nevertheless I cannot be too careful which is why I have a nice new shiny gun, I imagine one shot to the head will kill anything.

Larry takes a knife and dunks it in the peanut butter jar taking out a glob. Following one slice of wholemeal bread and starts to spread the peanut butter on thickly. Then after taking a huge bite out of it he turns on the television to the world news channel. The signal is very fuzzy and the news reporter looks very nervous and fearful as she reads the news.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has teamed up with Scotland Yard to investigate the biggest grave robbing case in history. Over 40,000 worldwide graves have been found to be empty, coffins have been gauged and clawed open. The only evidence found is that the coffins claw marks match the grave occupants. Both Investigations have concluded that the evidence was sickly planted by these mass perpetrators. The graves of dead presidents and even rock stars have been found empty. Scotland Yard investigated a similar case in 1999 where seven graves had been maliciously emptied with gravestones defaced. Scotland Yard share the same concern of some kind of cultish uprising.

"You got to be kidding me, grave robbing cult, the world has gone mad." says Larry to himself whilst eating the last piece of his sandwich.

A bright light burst outside, Larry covers his eyes from the flash then runs over to his window when it stops. He sees a colossal mushroom cloud in the horizon.

"Oh god!" he says.

A blast hits and Larry's home starts to shake violently. Larry crawls under the doorframe and holds on for dear life as the blast shakes his home to dust. He is knocked out by a piece of ceiling. Larry wakes hours later to find someone standing over him wearing a hat and wearing black clothing. This appears blurred to him.

“The end of days is here Larry, there is no stopping it. There is no stopping the coming night!” says the stranger standing over him.

Larry bolts upright and the stranger is gone. He wakes expecting to see his home in ruin and thanking his own lucky stars. The structure of his home is somehow normal and unaffected by the nuclear blast. Larry walks over to his window to see nothing but a perfect blue day. Larry pours himself a glass of water then sits down to watch the news as it was still going on in the background.

Even the Centre for Disease Control were called in to investigate. Their findings will be reported once their investigations have concluded.

Larry turns off the TV then walks over to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. The cabinet above the sink is fully loaded with vitamin supplements, various health supplements to stress medications. He grabs the bottle marked with a hospital label and the name of the doctor who prescribed this. Just about to open the lid when the phone starts to ring, he puts the pills back then answers the phone.

“Stocks residence can I rock you?” says Larry.

“Larry its me Chaz! Listen bro you have to listen to me everything depends on it.” says the lost and shaking voice on the other end.

Larry’s eyes widen in shock he pulls away from the phone to put it back on the hook. Chaz died two years earlier.

“Don’t hang up, just listen to me dude. I am dead but that isn’t stopping everyone else from rising to the occasion if you get me!”

An expression of shock and disbelief washes over him slowly as he holds the phone close and tight.

“How can this be? Dead people don’t come back and they don’t talk on phones either. So tell me, whoever you really are why aren’t I hanging up on you right now?”

“Because you fell it, you know a change is coming. You have

felt them following you for years which is why you moved to escape it. They found you as they found me brother. These things feed off people like you and I, the gifts we have provide them with nourishment.” says Chaz.

A vision of that thing standing over him to the woman at the store creeps up on him as a reminder. The voice sounded calm and reassuring the way Larry remembers Chaz.

He takes a deep breath and moves towards the blinds to look outside as a runaway convict in hiding would. There is nothing to see except the trees, river and mountains on the horizon.

“Say, I believe you, then tell me what is happening.”

Chaz appears in front of Larry, he is smiling an honest smile like he hasn’t seen his own brother in a while. Larry steps back for all he knew this is some kind of deception. The mysterious ghost of Chaz walks slowly towards Larry, Larry stops backing away and smiles. The two brothers hug with Chaz leading, he exhales with relief on Larry’s shoulder.

“Come with me Larry, we have a lot to prepare for!” says Chaz.

“Prepare for what?”

They look at each other, Chaz makes a hole in mid air, Larry stands back having never seen anything like it. Within the hole is the world as he knows it but now unfamiliar. To his shock he sees an army of the dead, the walking dead. Soldiers, presidents and thousands of people walk the earth in the world projected in the hole. Then the eyeless beings standing and marvelling at the world of the fallen.

“I have seen them, THEY are in Rhode Island right now!” says Larry with a faint expression of panic.

“Monsters, they live out of conventional sight and they feed off insanity, chaos and special gifts. Which is why THEY are here, watching you.”

“How long before...” Larry says unable to finish his question.

“The dead have begun rising, the final days have begun

Larry, this is why I came back.” Chaz takes a breath. “To prepare you!”

“I don’t know why I repressed it for so long, I remember the day we experienced these gifts for the first time. Do you remember? Back in Brockville, the day it all started!” says Larry.

1986 Brockville, Canada

The suburbs is picturesque bright with cherry blossom floating in the breeze from the neighbours trees. Two little boys are riding their BMX bikes around the block. The younger brother stops in sight of something, his name is Chaz. Larry, the elder brother stops right beside him. Chaz sees something, his pupils are fixed on something dead ahead near the curb leading up to the next street.

“Hey squirt why did you stop?” says Larry.

“Didn’t you see that Larry? I saw a man standing over there, he was staring at me Larry.”

They both stare for a moment, Larry rolls his eyes seeing nothing out of the ordinary, certainly nothing to worry about.

“Wow, no more monster movies for you.”

They peddle away leaving what Chaz saw behind, four smartly dressed people watching as the boys ride off. These people have no eyes and people walk by them oblivious. One of the strange beings turns to the others and nods suggestively.

Chaz’s mother is tucking them in bed followed by a kiss on the forehead.

“Sleep sweet my angels.”

The brothers look at each other from opposite sides of the room, one half of the room caters to Larry’s love for superheroes. The other half belonging to Chaz has

drawings of his own heroes including villains. Larry closes his eyes for a minute, as he wakes the bedroom begins to crumble, he sits upright in panic. Walls are shaking to dust, Chaz is asleep and also crumbles, Larry is terrified.

“CHAZ!”

With hands over his ears shielding from the noise of walls falling away and sirens blazing. There is nothing left, everything outside: the homes, trees, everything is gone. Larry gets off his bed and walks from what was his bedroom, his house to the road. The road is littered with the remains of the neighbours, their rotten remains just lying there on the ground. He trips over a body his hand reaches out to cushion the fall, as Larry gets up he sees that his hand is cut. A moment of silence passes for Larry as the sirens stop, the wind blows past his ear. The horizon is void of the picturesque nature of what he remembers. Something hisses Larry’s name from behind him then suddenly he wakes up in his bed as if it had never happened. The cut on his hand is still there for some reason, Larry is scared and immediately runs over to Chaz sleeping. Brushing Chaz’s hair back from his eyes he is relieved and gently hugs him.

1998

Larry and Chaz are sitting in a coffee house talking like it was something they would do every other month.

“So hows school?” says Chaz.

“Has its moments, I split up with Jennifer last week.”

“Your kidding, I liked her she was good for you man.” says Larry in an understanding and disappointed manner.

Chaz looks at his watch then reaches into his inner jacket pocket and brings out a bottle of pills.

“What are those?” asks Larry.

“Prescribed meds, I have been having some vivid hallucinations lately. I had one similar when we were kids and since then they have gotten stronger.”

Being the concerned big brother Larry takes the pills from Chaz to read the label. His eyes roll then he turns his attention on Chaz.

“How long have you been taking these?”

“Three years now, I know what you are going to say Larry and I know I should have told you. I guess I was just scared that you might think I needed more help and I don’t want to be anyone’s charity cause.” says Chaz.

Larry hands Chaz back the pills and takes a sip of his coffee then looks back at Chaz.

“You are my little brother and that will never change, I swore to our mother that I would take care of you and I meant it.”

“Dude I don’t need you over my shoulder, I can take care of myself. I don’t want anyone to look at me or treat me like some kind of freak and that includes you.” says Chaz.

Chaz puts the pills back in his jacket and drinks the last of his coffee then reaches for his book bag.

“Monsters exist Larry, I can still see them but I am powerless to do anything about it. Why should I let them win? Why should I let them take my mind? If I give in that is exactly what will happen.”

“You cant go through this alone Chaz.” says Larry.

“I know that’s why I need you to be there when I need you brother but at least let me try on my own.”

Chaz exit’s the coffee house leaving Larry behind staring out of the window. Watching on as his younger brother crosses the road and on to the train station.

The flashback ends, Larry is sitting opposite the ghost of Chaz both with stern expressions. Two brothers standing in a state of awareness that something bad is happening, time is running out not just for Larry but the world.

“Tell me everything.” says Larry.

Suddenly the walls distort, what was solid appears as liquid as the walls stretch outward and the shape of a woman becomes apparent. Chaz looks at Larry with a very worried expression of course Chaz is unable to physically do anything.

"Larry, get the hell out of here! Its her, she has come for you as she came for me."

"I am not running Chaz."

The woman is Erika she has fully emerged from the walls distortion, she brushes her hair back over itself out of her eyes then smiles at Chaz.

"How is my favourite dead patient tonight?" Erika snarls.

"Your not human and your not taking my brother you ugly bitch, that's right I see your true face."

Erika struts across to Chaz who looks at her with pure hatred she places her hands on his face. Larry looks surprised that she can touch him being that he is a ghost.

"Oh Chaz we could have made magic together, I wouldn't have drained you completely, just your gift. Death was your choice, an eternity here walking amongst the living now that is torture."

Larry hears a hungry moaning sound outside, the sound of so many hungry beasts. Yearning to feast upon the unique soul of Larry, a banquet that will sustain them for another thousand years. The thing Chaz knows as Erika takes her hands off his face and advances slowly towards Larry who is getting a little anxious.

"Before I take what was never meant for a mortal I want you to know what your brother was about to tell you. I want to tell you why, the history of my kind and the reason why the dead are returning to life." says Erika.

We have existed for many millennia my sweet human travelling from one realm to the next in search of knowledge. That's what we were, seekers of the truth not the hungry

monsters we became. Our own gifts were beyond your comprehension, we could do things, extraordinary things like you and Chaz. Our purpose was order and creating gods for subspecies so that they may know order. Create worlds so that life may live and advance, we are those that gods worshiped. Sadly one of our kind decided he wanted it all and took our gifts from us, a few thousand years later we became monsters, wanting and hungry. The one who did this to us escaped into the void and now exists in your world. Hungry for the old ways, starving for our power. The appearance of my once beautiful children became like their minds, twisted and distorted. Your world's dead are rising because the balance is tipped, as long as you live it will only get worse...I promise. The immortal I mentioned is responsible for this, only I can fight him, I can stop this and save your mortal race. You know now what we are and what we need, will you still run knowing that your race may die if only to save yourself Larry?

Larry takes a step forward and looks her in the eye, he has something grasped tightly at his side unseen by Erika.

"Will you really save us? How can I be sure of that, your kind hunted my little brother for years until you finally drove him into death's hands. Is your kind worthy of salvation?"

The hungry begin to stir in the shadows and outside ensuring no escape, his eyes wander to the shifting noises then back. Outside not too far from the town the walking dead stumble towards the town. Their faces crawling with maggots and rot and those that are too far rotten to walk are dragging themselves.

"I don't know how or why, but I can feel them. Hundreds of tired souls rising up and coming here. I feel like, they want to protect me." says Larry.

Larry swings the axe at her cutting into her skull, she looks at him with the axe jammed into her face. Chaz runs over to brace the door to stop the creatures from outside coming in.

“Why would some power resurrect the dead to protect me, whatever it is ITS bigger than you and me Erika.”

“We will take back what is ours Larry, nothing is going to stop us not you and NOT whatever is coming here.”

Erika pulls the axe from her face and smiles nervously, her lip quivers and the side of her face twitches, she is afraid. Chaz’s form begins to flicker in and out of spectrum he panics as he is unable to hold the door for long. He grabs the axe off her then looks over to Chaz and his predicament. “What’s happening to you Chaz?”

“I cant stay here much longer, my advice to you is run, run like hell.”

Erika reaches out to grab Larry but her grip is somehow weakened. The moans of the dead are coming closer to the house, the creatures cower to the shadows away from the dead. Her claws tear through his shirt and through the skin, Larry struggles with her and notices the gas bottle used for the cooker over her shoulder. Chaz weakens and falls to the floor Larry pushes Erika into the DVD shelves.

“Run towards the dead larry, run towards the dead.” says Chaz before he vanishes.

He rushes over to the spot Chaz vanished on, there is no trace. Larry runs into the kitchen and repeatedly whacks the gas bottle until it is breached. It isn’t long before the creatures open the door and the gas has filled the room. Larry looks out of his window and sees the dead standing outside waiting for him, he takes a run at the window and leaps through the glass. The gas in the house reaches the pilot light causing the house and everything in it to explode.

Three months later

On a television in a dusty apartment someone is flicking over the channels, someone unseen. The news reports come flooding in on every channel, photos of thousands of empty

graveyards. Disturbed and flustered government and world leaders fighting for answers to every public question. Riots breaking out lead by scared groups trying to force the end where some are trying to prevent it. There is even shocking footage of the walking dead being shot down. A man is sitting in a chair with his back to the front door, it is Larry. Suddenly the door opens and dead people walk in, Larry turns off the television and turns to their desperate rotted expressions.

"I know, I promise you that you will all be able to rest once my work is done." says Larry reassuring and sympathetic to the dead.

They part as Larry leaves the apartment he walks downstairs and outside the building. Closing his eyes he wonders in a trance state then his inner voice can be heard:

"The dead have come to protect me and all who have special gifts. Meanwhile the mortal world tears itself apart in fear and desperation for the truth. I know the truth. I know my destiny. I know what hunts me. Today is the day another damned being falls by my hands."

Larry opens his eyes waking up expressionless and ready, ready to fight. Where he is now is similar to his own world only its not the mortals that walk here, but the ones who want his power. He draws his sword, on it are hundreds of symbols from all known religions even some that are unfamiliar and unique. A weapon forged with the help of those that believe Larry is the chosen one. Larry draws his sword back and more armed mortals appear to fight with him. Chaz appears also, standing by Larry's side with an axe in one hand.

"This is who we are."

The Tale of the Hanged Man

by T.A. Donnelly

I first heard about the Tale of the Hanged Man three years ago. It was during my second stay in Towergate Priory where I was trying to deal with some of my longstanding 'issues.' It was a particularly unfortunate inmate who made me aware of the Tale's existence. They didn't call us "inmates" of course, they called us "clients," or some of the older nurses forgot themselves and called us "patients." But those of us who knew where we were called ourselves *inmates*, because that is what we were.

On my third day, when I was walking in the gardens, a wretched looking man approached me. He was wearing silk pyjamas and a silk dressing gown which were covered in mud, and stains that looked like grass, blood and God-knows-what else.

He clutched at my arm, and looking pleadingly into my eyes whispering hoarsely, "The Hanged Man, have you heard the tale of the Hanged Man?"

I thought he was raving like many of the tortured souls in Towergate, so I just humoured him.

"Oh yes," I said, "The Tale of the Hanged Man is one of my favourites."

This was obviously the wrong thing to say.

He looked terrified and appalled. "Has it taken you too?" He let out a moan like a wounded animal. "It *will* take you if you talk about it so."

Just then four orderlies in white coats emerged from the bushes. Behind them came a grey bearded doctor with a hypodermic syringe. "Now then Lord Nethercott," he said, as if talking to a naughty child, "be a good boy and come without a struggle this time."

They beat the poor man brutally and carried him off. His screams only died down when drugs and distance took him from the gardens.

Something about the unfortunate man haunted me, as did something about the "Tale of the Hanged Man."

When the chaplain came to give communion I waited outside the door to ask him if he knew what was the story about the deranged man. I said the staff called him "Lord something-or-other"

"Ah, that would be Lord Nethercott," the Chaplain began. "Normally I wouldn't be able to discuss a client with you, but as his story has been all over the papers I don't see any harm..."

The chaplain told me about the glittering career of the Conservative Lord, cut suddenly short when he developed a bizarre paranoid schizophrenic delusion about a hanged man. "Some medieval story about a peasant being executed or some such nonsense," he explained.

When I enquired further he warned me away from the subject. "Funny thing," he said, "He's not the only one with a delusion about a 'hanged man.' I'd stay clear if I were you, especially in your emotional state."

I tried to get more out of him on the subject but he refused to say anything else and I left when he started quoting Bible verses at me. (Something from Revelation five about a "lamb that was slain.")

From that time on I kept hearing "The Tale of the Hanged Man." I heard the staff joking about it as they walked down corridors. I heard it in the drug induced mumbles of the most disturbed of the inmates. I heard it in the deranged screams that broke the silence of the asylum by night.

An elderly inmate spoke of the Hanged Man the night before she jumped from the top of the Tower. "I was all sixes and sevens till I discovered the Tale," she said. "I had heard that the Hanged Man's story made you crazy. But it's made me as right as rain."

I asked her to tell me the story. "It isn't always the same lovie," she told me, "for an instance with me I heard it as a Hanged Man and then again as a Hanged Woman." Then she started laughing. She laughed and laughed for hours on end; and I believe she didn't stop until her head hit the tarmac path by the Tower.

I was in and out of the sanatorium for the next few years. Always and everywhere I felt I was just a few paces behind someone who knew the Tale. I heard "the Hanged Man" in conversations on the bus. In the whispers of lovers over coffee cups in cafes. In the rhythm of the underground trains stuttering through their tunnels.

Back in the sanatorium there was a girl called Gaia, an anorexic Goth with a history of repeated suicide attempts. She was always trying to tell the inmates' fortunes and give them Tarot readings. When the staff caught her they went berserk, confiscated her cards and prescribed extra sessions of electrotherapy. They were particularly down on her fortune telling because she gave everyone such dismal news. The staff thought this was because of her depressive personality. I couldn't help but wonder if foretelling ill fortune to the lost souls in an asylum was a sign of her accuracy. Certainly those for whom she foretold trouble seemed to find it; their insanity seemed to deepen and they often met unpleasant ends. The staff found it easier to blame Gaia than themselves. So they took her crystals, forbade her to use tea leaves (although she could often be seen ripping open tea bags) and impounded her Tarot cards. She told me that they had taken nine decks from her, but she wouldn't tell me where she got the new ones from.

She took my reading: "the Fool" characterized my past; "the Ten of swords"

described my present. At the sight of it she shook her head. "Most people assume that 'Death' is the worst card in the deck." She said, " But it isn't."

"So what is?" I asked, but from the way she was looking at my cards I could guess.

"The Ten of swords." She said grimly.

I knew she did not think this was a good reading.

Her eyes were locked to mine as she turned over the final card, the card that signified my future.

"The Hanged Man!" She sucked in her breath through hollow cheeks. "That's a reversal of the expected, harbinger of change"

"The Hanged Man is my future?"

I had always known it, but my heart was pounding. "Is that good?"

"It depends" she replied. It was clear from her face that she did not think this was good. It was also clear that she had no idea of the enormity of what this meant to me. "It often means that some kind of sacrifice is being made" she continued, "or needs to be made."

I asked her did she know the Tale of the Hanged Man, but at the mention of it her eyes widened with fear and she hissed "*That* story will send you mad forever." and snatched up her cards and ran out of the room. She refused to speak to me again.

Another reprieve from the sanatorium and the hints and whispers of the Hanged Man grew further.

Another collapse followed and another committal. And then the answer...

It is eleven hours since I discovered the secret of the tale of the Hanged Man. Back inside the Priory I once again saw the wild man who first told me about the story.

Now he looks even more wretched. His face is covered in scratches and bruises. I saw them wheel him past me in a wheelchair, struggling frantically against the straight jacket they had put on him.

"You know the story I can see it in your eyes," he cried out, flecks of white spit

falling down his chin, "You know the Tale of the Hanged Man. You are one of us."

It was then that I realised that the story was not about some unfortunate Medieval peasant who was executed by hanging. It was about *me*. There isn't just one Tale, a new one is created by everyone infected by the idea. I didn't *find* the Tale of the Hanged Man, I *wrote* it.

It's true it sends you insane. It's taken me. I can feel its tentacles in my soul as I write.

I'm so sorry.

This is the story.

You've read it now

Goodbye.

HERE COMES MY BRAIN!

Jason Barthelemy

I don't fully comprehend why this dreadful experience was visited upon me, but I will never forget the faces of those responsible. Well, I won't forget their eyes at least. Most of those bastards were wearing surgical masks half the time.

At home, with my wife and child on the night of September 24th, 1983, we were enjoying a meal of meatloaf when they burst through the door with ski masks and automatic weapons. Forced onto our knees in execution style, I closed my eyes and waited for the gunshots, but they never came. As it happens, a bullet through my skull, and those of my family, would have been preferable to what they really had in mind for us. Well, I'm a little confused right now...perhaps it's idyllic that they did not ventilate my head just then.

Bags were placed over our heads and ropes around our arms and legs, before they violently shoved us into the back of a truck, slamming the metal door behind us. We were then carted off to God knows where, but the drive seemed to have lasted for several hours. I tried to comfort my wife, dear Julia, and my child, sweet little Sarah, but panic had taken over and they could only respond with shrieks and tears.

At least two others were in the back of the truck with us, and another couple was thrown on top of the pile before the truck came to a stop at our destination. When the doors were opened, screams of fear and protest were being issued from the mouths of my family, as well as the other victims, but there were no answers coming from our captors. They remained silent as they pulled me from the truck and shoved me down into a wheelchair, pushing me across a gravel path, inside a building of some sort, and finally down a long elevator. With the bag over my head, I can only guess where they took my wife and child, but I pray that they did not suffer the same fate as I. I never saw or heard from them again.

When the elevator reached the end of its decent, they wheeled me down a long corridor. The front left wheel of the wheelchair was busted like an old metal shopping cart. I could tell because the damn thing kept spinning

erratically, causing the chair to bear to the left and my legs to be slammed into the walls, as the asshole pushing me along failed to compensate properly. Perhaps he did it on purpose. Either way, he is lucky I didn't see his face at the time, or I would have added him to my shit list, which has grown quite extensive recently.

I was brought to a cell where I was strapped to a metal bed frame, void of a mattress, where they finally removed the bag from my head. I took in my surroundings, which appeared to be a cell with sterile white walls, a stainless steel sink and toilet, and the metal bed frame I was now strapped to. Oh, and the men who wheeled me here and bound me, who were the first to not be wearing masks, their first mistake. I guess the asshole that bruised my knees made it on my list after all.

Uselessly, I once more pleaded for answers, forgiveness for offenses I did not knowingly commit, for the release of my lovely Julia and Sarah, and at first I foolishly thought the large man with the bushy beard may actually be considering granting at least some of my wishes. He wore a look of genuine compassion and guilt upon his pudgy face, but he remained silent as had all the rest. Whether or not he agreed with what was being done to my family and I had become irrelevant. He was given a chance and did nothing, and so he was added to my mental list.

I laid there for hours, trying to figure out what I had done, why they had chosen my family, but came to the conclusion that we were selected at random, as were the other victims that accompanied us in the back of the truck. There was no other explanation I could conjure. I owed no debts outside of credit cards and as evil as they can be, even they would not stoop to such a level. I had no known enemies, have never worked for the government or any organization that would deem that I had *seen too much*. No, they most likely had pages from the phonebook tacked to a wall while they proceeded to throw darts while wearing blindfolds. Aren't I a lucky son of a bitch?

Once or twice I heard someone crying, in addition to shrieks of dread, pain, or both, and I tried to discern if any of those voices belonged to my wife or child. After a short while those voices fell silent, either by torn throats caused by over usage, by gag, or worse. I cried for hours with thoughts of my Julia and Sarah. Poor Sarah, she was only eight years old. I have no idea what time it was when I finally cried myself to sleep. It was impossible to keep track of time this far underground.

I was awakened sometime later, which could have been hours or minutes after falling asleep, by the men who wheeled me to this room. They were accompanied by a doctor wearing a surgical mask and blue latex

gloves. The doctor briefly looked at me through his black rimmed spectacles then gave me an injection which almost immediately caused paralysis, though I remained conscious and aware.

“Bring patient M302 to the operation room.” The doctor instructed the orderlies.

The name is Howard, I wanted to tell him, but the injection had worked on my lips as well. They lifted the deadweight that was my body and deposited it into the wheelchair with that blasted broken wheel, proceeding to push me down the hall, further bruising my knees on the cold walls due to that wicked left turn the chair so enjoyed making, and finally to the operation room the good doctor spoke of.

The room was well lit and sterile, with white walls and stainless steel tables, sinks and surgical equipment. There was a solitary metal chair in the center of the room with an adjustable high voltage light like those at a dentist’s office. Fluorescent bulbs illuminated the room and the two additional doctors who were waiting inside, loading syringes with a glowing amber liquid. Was that a smile I saw beneath the mask of the female doctor? That bitch just jumped up a peg on my shit list.

The orderlies lifted me out of the wheelchair and into the uncomfortable metal dentist chair, which was preferable to the metal bed frame in my cell, then they left without a word, leaving me alone with the three mad scientists.

The second doctor, a man with fiery red hair and green goblin eyes was looking over my chart. “Patient M302...male, thirty two years old, married with one child, eight years of age, perfect health aside from a high level of sodium.” He said with rising excitement. “A perfect specimen.”

A specimen for what, I wanted to know. My lips were still incapable of forming words and I cursed my inability to defend myself in some way. I tried to think of what I would say even if I could speak, but all that came to my feeble mind were obscenities, which only proceeded to frustrate me further.

“We have made significant progress with the reanimation doctor.” The bitch said to the doctor who had me brought from my cell. “There have been unexpected mutations to the tissue.”

“Very good, let’s proceed with the amputation.” The good doctor said without emotion.

I am not embarrassed to say that I’m almost positive I urinated in my pants at that moment. Had I the time to finish my meatloaf before they dragged me away from dinner, I may very well have moved my bowls in the same instant. My thoughts were racing from my own safety and survival, to

that of my family. Were they being subjected to the same devious experimentation as I? I suppose in this instance, if the worst case scenario were the true one, ignorance was preferable.

At the time, my mind was too far gone to attempt to comprehend the purpose of their experimentation. I was too busy trying to figure out just what they intended to amputate. It was the bitch that handed the surgical saw to the good doctor - was she smiling again? - while fire head got ready the syringe with the amber liquid.

"Left index finger." The doctor informed the bitch in monotone while she wrote it down in my chart. "Removal and regeneration to take place on uh September 25th at 9:24 AM."

I was a coward and closed my eyes, unable to bear witness to the amputation of my left index finger. After a moment I opened them but not to access the damage. I wished to burn the image of these three into my mind, so that I will remember in the event that I set myself free.

They stopped the bleeding and carried my finger in a metal tray to the table where the redhead was waiting. The good doctor looked at his watch as the redhead injected the serum into my recently severed finger.

"The time is uh 9:36 AM and the serum has just been administered to patient M302's left index finger." He said into a tape recorder while looking at my finger under a microscope. "The cells are reacting to the serum at an uh alarming rate. Regeneration is occurring at record speed. 9:38 AM...the finger is showing signs of movement already and is uh trying to make its way off the table."

Had I not seen it with my own eyes I would think myself mad, but I dare say that my finger was moving on its own, apart from my body. I couldn't move the fingers that remained on my person, yet that damn finger was inching its way across the metal table, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

"We must analyze this data and continue tomorrow morning. Please have patient M302 returned to his cell." The good doctor said.

The orderlies returned and put me back in the wretched wheelchair, God I hate that damn chair, and pushed me back to my cell. I was not bound this time and they even left me a tray of food and were kind enough to put a mattress on my bed. How nice of them. The bindings were not necessary, as even when the strength returned so that I could once again move, I barely had the energy to lift the food to my mouth, let alone defend myself if they returned to bring me back to the operating room.

I dragged myself back to the bed after using the toilet and tried to sleep. I don't recollect how long I laid there but I don't remember sleeping at all. I was too busy trying to figure out just what was happening. They were

obviously experimenting with the reanimation of dead tissue but for what purpose? Were they trying to prolong life, or make living soldiers out of the dead? The paranoid, conspiracy theorist in me had me believing the latter to be the case, but it didn't really matter either way.

Sometime later, mister bushy face returned and strapped me into the chair and once again, I was brought to the operation room. The good doctor was busy scribbling frantically in my chart while the bitch helped the orderly lift me into the metal chair once more. I was administered another shot of the debilitating drug and then she joined the doctor, who was admiring the progress my finger had been making since...yesterday?

"The subject's left index finger has grown uh tendrils which it has used to lift itself out of the dish." The doctor said. "An alternate means of storage is necessary to avoid losing the specimen. Today we will attempt to reanimate a smaller piece of loose flesh, and see what mutations will occur with the adjustments made to the serum based off of our findings."

I was too busy watching my finger to even notice the redhead cutting a sliver of flesh from my left thigh. I shifted my eyes down to see him placing a bandage over the exposed muscle, before carrying the flesh to the doctor and the bitch on a tray, next to a syringe filled with the reanimation serum. The syringe was emptied into my flesh and they once again analyzed the data. I was not kept in the room long enough to monitor the results this time and was carted off almost as quickly as I was brought in.

I gather that only an hour or two passed before they brought me back to the operating room. What I saw was astonishing. In the few hours since they had injected the flesh from my thigh with the regenerating liquid, it had managed to mutate, forming tiny bumps that it could wiggle to pull itself along. The doctors had their masks off, big mistake, and were laughing as they watched my flesh drag itself across the cold tile floor. Was that a sense of cold I felt in the hole where my skin had been removed?

"Patient M302's body is reacting uh surprisingly well to the adjusted serum and has made significant mutations in an alarmingly short time frame." The doctor spoke into his tape recorder. I could see without his mask that he resembled a banker or an attorney, clean shaven, with a hard, square jaw. He pushed up his spectacles with his left index finger as he continued to speak. I found myself growing jealous of his finger, as silly as that may seem.

"Very soon now, we may be able to form new life from just a fraction of one's body." The doctor continued, but I stopped listening at that point, as I was too concerned with the line the bitch was drawing along my left leg with a marker, just above my knee.

I think he said something about using a larger piece today, but I was crying and the tears obstructed my vision as the circular saw was buzzing, hovering over my left thigh.

Dear God, they took my leg.

I lost track of the days after that. My mind was beginning to deteriorate along with my body. Before I had the chance to miss my leg, they took the other one. Even if I was lucky enough to make it out of this alive, I'd never be able to walk again. I would be a cripple for life. I felt selfish, worrying for my own safety, unaware of what might be happening to my wife and daughter, but there was nothing I could do for them if I could not first save myself.

The experiments grew more bizarre and horrific as time passed and by the time they took my arms, I had seen images that would be burned into my mind forever. I'll never forget the haunting mutations I witnessed from the metal chair in that operating room, deep underground, seen only as a subject, a specimen.

I watched in horror as my toes separated themselves from my foot on their own, attached only by thin tendrils, which wrapped themselves around a vial of green liquid, throwing it down onto the tiled floor. My right hand, void of fingers which were used in further experiments, spawned phallic growths from where my fingers once were. My nipple, which was cut away several days ago had escaped, having grown in length and crawled away like an inch worm. They still have not found it.

I was merely a torso with a head at this point and I wondered how much longer they would keep my head intact. They were running low on body parts and they were taking them more frequently as the experiments grew more and more feverish. As new orderlies came and went, I added them to my shit list, along with the doctor, the bitch, fire head and the orderlies who first brought me to my cell, bushy beard and his faggot friend.

Finally, one day they took the saw to my skull and I blacked out for some time. When I awoke I found my view obscured by liquid. Looking through the glass, I saw the doctors working on another patient, a woman. It could have been my wife, but the flesh on her face was removed, as were her arms and legs. My God, she was still alive. I could see her chest moving up and down as she breathed. I'll never know if that was my wife, but it didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was revenge.

I looked around at my surroundings. I was in a glass container filled with liquid and I could move my eyes around, which I found to be on tendrils, attached to my brain. All that remains of me is my brain and my eyes. They let me keep my eyes.

Their last mistake.

They left the part of me that can think, remember, plot, reason...and they left my eyes so I can see. So I can recall the faces of those who took my body apart piece by piece, along with those who assisted them. But then my passion for revenge began to subside as I realized how little I could do, being only a brain with a pair of eyes on stalks like a crab.

Then I saw the tentacles that had developed from my brain and the hundreds of spines, or thorns, that had grown on them. I slowly and cautiously unscrewed the lid that held me in my glass house, as the doctors cleaned up after their surgery. Carefully, so as not to make a sound, I used my tentacles to place the lid on the shelf next to my jar and turned my eyes toward the bitch, who smiled when she unmade my body.

The other doctors had left the room and she remained behind, making notes and straightening the shelves that contained countless mutated organs and limbs. With no little effort, I pulled myself from the liquid and slopped onto the tiled floor below in a wet splash.

Startled, the bitch turned to see my tentacles wrapping around her ankle, my thorns digging into her flesh. She started to scream and I wrapped a tentacle around her neck, while shoving a second one down her throat to silence her. I looked at her face, a mixture of dread and confusion and if I still had a mouth, I would have smiled. My thorns unmade the inside of her throat while I squeezed tightly around her thin, pale neck. Her life was extinguished all too soon for my taste, but I felt great, for the first time since they pulled me away from my meatloaf.

The redhead must have heard the bitch struggling and he returned to the room suddenly, with a look of urgency on his freckled face. I wrapped my tentacles around a desk leg to his left and pulled myself toward him before he had time to comprehend just what was happening. I'll finish up with fire head and then the good doctor will be next.

All right you bastards, here comes my brain!